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## **Crossing the border of 1603: neglected poets in a time of political transition**

**Alan Riach**

**Mark Alexander Boyd, the Castalian Band and William Drummond of Hawthornden aren't much heard of today, yet they worked at the same time as Shakespeare. No harm would be done if a fraction of the time spent on the great English playwright were devoted to them. They deserve some reappraisal.**

The Castalian Band was a group of poets associated closely with and effectively led by King James VI (1566-1625) before, and to a lesser extent after, he became James I in London in 1603. James was a poet himself, alongside Alexander Montgomerie, William Fowler, John Stewart of Baldynneis and others. Before we come to them, one of their older contemporaries warrants attention for his own sake. I'd propose that on the strength of a single poem, he's one of our greatest writers.

Mark Alexander Boyd (1563-1601) was the oldest of three cousins, all literary figures, of the Carrick family of the Boyds of Penkill. Penkill Castle, near Girvan in Ayrshire, their family home, is now privately owned but houses a remarkable stairwell mural depicting scenes from James I's poem, *The Kingis Quair*. Boyd studied at Glasgow University, where apparently he was an insubordinate scholar, leading a rebellion against the Principal, Andrew Melville, and quarrelling violently with his teachers. He travelled to Paris, gambled away his money, joined a troop of horse-soldiers fighting German and Swiss mercenaries and journeyed through France, Italy and the Low Countries, having various adventures. He published a collection of letters and poems in Latin and Greek in Antwerp in 1592, finally returning to Scotland where he died at Penkill in 1601 and was buried in the churchyard at Old Dailly. His biography by Lord Hailes was published in 1783. This is my version of one of his Latin poems, a poem of gratitude addressed to his teacher Patrick Sharpe:

If you were the first to show me how to see

The mountains to their topmost peaks, and how to drink

As deep as earth from replenishing springs –

Now, face to face –

It is not only words, nor poor prayers sent by me,

Nor fragile flowers, nor the simple strength of my arms, I think,

But thanks from my soul this poem brings –

Now, let's embrace!

“Cupid and Venus” is Boyd’s greatest poem and one of the finest sonnets ever written. Ezra Pound, in his indispensable book *ABC of Reading* (1951), wrote of it: “Boyd is ‘saying it in a beautiful way’. The apple is excellent for a few days or a week before it is ripe, then it is ripe; it is still excellent for a few days after it has passed the point of maturity. I suppose this is the most beautiful sonnet in the language, at any rate it has one nomination.”

By which I take it Pound means that “Cupid and Venus” is the most beautiful sonnet because it is most perfectly ripe. Fools will quibble.

One of Scotland’s greatest composers is Francis George Scott (1880-1958), a major songwriter in the European tradition whose songs for voice and piano, available on Moonstruck (Signum Classics, SIGCD096), include wonderful settings of Burns and others, all quite miraculously catching the movements of poetic structures and emotional shifts in language. He uses the piano to evoke a range of experiences from devastating tragedy to comic frivolity.

Scott’s setting of “Cupid and Venus” alone is worth the price of the CD and listening to it delivers deep interpretation of the poem itself. From the opening line, with its lonely, tremulous, cold-fever sense of moving around blindly in circles, pursued and almost overwhelmed by an exhausting, enfeebling “fantasy” (subtle arpeggios), through the fragility and futility of the sounds of the falling leaf and the reed trembling in the breeze, you know that you are in the company of two masters, the poet and the composer. Sonorous chords of hymn-like resolution support line 5, acknowledging the “Twa gods” before giving way to mysterious, delicate but strong, hopeful phrasing describing the blind boy Cupid and the love-goddess Venus, the “wife” engendered by the sea. Perfectly balanced, the last six lines

reflect on the preceding first eight lines, musically and verbally, compounding the pain of love's helpless magnetic commitment with the uncertainty or impossibility of predicting a happy outcome. Bad enough to plough sand and sow seed in the air, but such unhappiness is nothing next to the sweeping tonal descent into "twice unhappier is he..." who feeds his heart with a "mad desire" and persists in his wild, hopeless, unending quest, led by blind love and taught by childish manger-faith. The unreasoned and inexplicable is perfectly combined with the tenderness of trembling initiation in these closing phrases. This is a masterpiece. The music is in the text already, but if you want to hear it brought out in an interpretation that is both accurate and exquisite, find the CD.

Boyd died two years before the Union of the Crowns, an older contemporary of the Castalian Band. Like Elizabeth Melville, the first woman to have published a book of poems (in 1603), this loose group of poets produced work before and after that historical transition. The flavour of work by Alexander Montgomerie (c.1555-c.97) may be sampled in "The Solsequium" or the ending of "A Lang Guidnicht":

Sen for thy saik Death with his darte me shot  
That I am bot a carioun of clay  
Wha whylome lay about thy snaue [snowy] throt,  
Nou must I rot wha sum tym stood so stay  
What sall I say? This warld will away.  
Anis on a day I seimd a semely sight  
Thou wants the wight that never said thee nay.  
Adeu for ay. This is a lang guidnicht.

Montgomerie's poems deal with love, mortality, parting and commitment and he was deeply embroiled in the political and religious transition from the reigns of Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I of England, through to that of James VI and I. As a Catholic supporter of Mary,

Montgomerie carefully places coded messages in the political and religious allegory of his long poem, *The Cherrie and the Slae* (1597). He is the original “Enigma Code” man.

The magnum opus of John Stewart of Baldynneis (c.1545-c.1605) is *Roland Furious* (c.1582-4), a version of *Orlando Furioso* (c.1505-1516) by the Italian court-poet Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533). Ariosto’s poem was influential all across Europe as a racy, adventure-filled, elegant, endlessly-plotted, artfully-poised saga, a kaleidoscope of monsters and fabulous encounters, battles and love affairs, romantic and grotesque. However, its forty-six cantos, stretching to 1600 pages, test the most committed Proust-lover’s stamina, whereas Stewart’s shorter, coarser, more intensely flamboyant abbreviated version in twelve cantos is constantly arresting. Stewart was perfectly capable of elegance and formal poise in his sonnets, but the pacy bravura of *Roland Furious* compels excitement and attention. The battle scenes, in which Roland flourishes his sword “Durandel” to stunning effect, are action-packed. Here’s my own re-rendering in modern English of the close of the first canto:

As thunder through the elements runs crazed  
And the little heather blossoms that the wind blows all about  
Like chestnuts split and strewn, eyes wide and all amazed  
So Roland scattered warriors, bold and stout,  
With lots of noise and clamour. So stalwartly he struck,  
Some fled and hid in caves. He simply ran amuk.  
Some crept off, scared of every little thing,  
Such terror Roland was equipped to bring.  
These frightened folk their anguish they endured  
While Roland grew to hot pursuit inured,  
Chasing folk round hollows, valleys, hills and braes,  
Valiant and swift, jumping into frays  
Like a firefly from the firmament, he moves fast  
When Mighty Jove blows up the high winds’ blast  
The little daisies growing, all around, just then,  
As Roland looks about him, and suddenly when  
Two horses gallop up and try to bring rescue  
To riders, DURANDEL once more Roland lightly drew  
And swinging it four times, he both men and horses slew.

Yet Stewart could be a marvellously tender poet, as in “Of a Fountain”:

Fresh fountain fair and springing cold and clean  
As brightest crystal clear with silver ground,  
Close clad about by wholesome herbs all green,

Those twinkling streams do yield a lovely sound,  
With bonnie trees as shelter all around  
From violence of the high sky's brightness there,  
And scented leaves suave wind-drafts make rebound  
In sweetest breathings of the temperate air –  
When the brassy sun above is flaming all aglare  
To scorch the earth in ardent heat and flare,  
Then, Traveller, if hurt by this, repair  
    Here to this place: you will refreshment find  
    Both in the Well, the Shadow and the Wind.

Another member of the Castalian Band, William Fowler (1560-1612) is remembered for a sequence of seventy-two sonnets, *The Tarantula of Love* (1587). In his most anthologised poem, “Ship-broken men”, a vivid description of shipwreck effectively carries the metaphoric meaning of sexual desire: “In hope if anes I be to shipwreck driven, / Ye will me thole to anchor in your heaven.”

After the first major turning point of modern British constitutional history, when Elizabeth I of England died and James rode down to London, Shakespeare's immediate contemporary Ben Jonson (1572-1637) claimed Scottish ancestry and in 1619, and visited William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649) at Hawthornden Castle, just south of Edinburgh. Drummond, like Mark Alexander Boyd, is not closely grouped with Castalian Band but he was their contemporary, on the other side of the Union. The quality of his work is carefully assessed in Edwin Morgan's essay, “How Good a Poet is Drummond?” in *Crossing the Border: Essays on Scottish Literature* (1990), where he reminds us of his satirical, angry and humorous qualities, as in the epitaphs, epigrams, or the savage hate-poem about a former lover, “For a Ladyes Summonds of Nonentree” where he can be seen, as Morgan puts it, “striking out like a scorpion”:

Summond not for mee to enter, there's no doubt  
These twice four years and more I have beene out,  
And I it not denie; I did you wrong  
At first, but since could not come in for throng.  
Counts, knights, and Gentilles so hanted your Roome  
Then your kinsmen, yeomen, and evry Groome.

Thus he begins, and it gets much worse: “Unhapy Kite, doth not thy breath stinke worse / Than that strong matter which Nature doth force / From a turn’d Gutt...” and goes on to ask, “Are not the Twinnes now of thy withered brest... / Like sodden Haggises...” and resolves: “Let mee alone, and force mee not to enter / If Hell be into earth its in your Center.”

Morgan notes that Drummond is a little like Yeats: “Hawthornden was his Thoor Ballylee from which he watched *his* civil war raging back and forth. One remembers also the patents Drummond took out in 1627 for new and fearsome weapons and other military devices; even if these never got beyond the drawing-board, the mere fact that he had thought them up, apparently with some care, presents an extraordinary contrast to any view of him as a delicate lyricist and nothing more.” But he was certainly a delicate and fine lyricist. This is evident in numerous songs, “madrigals” and sonnets, and especially in “Song ii”:

*Phoebus arise,*

*And paint the sable Skies*

*With azure, white and Red:*

*Rowse Memnons Mother from her Tythons Bed, [dawn, from night]*

*That Shee thy Cariere may with Roses spread, [carriage (the sky)]*

*The Nightingales thy Comming each where sing,*

*Make an eternall Spring,*

*Give Life to this dark Worlde which lieth dead.*

*Spreade foorth thy golden Haire*

*In larger Lockes than thou wast wont before,*

*And Emperour-like decore [decorate]*

*With Diademe of pearle thy Temples faire:*

*Chase hence the uglie Night*

*Which serves but to make deare thy glorious Light...*

The Castalian Band were sophisticated, erudite, clever, sharp and witty. They could as easily be venomous as festive. If we think of their contemporaries in Elizabethan and then Jacobean London, they hold their own authority. These courtly poets literally had no court in Edinburgh after 1603 but there was another tradition in Scottish literature flourishing around this time, working well beyond the sophisticates of the capital city and its environs: the Ballads.

**[Boxed off:]**

**Mark Alexander Boyd**

*Cupid and Venus*

**Fra bank to bank, fra wood to wood I rin,  
Ourhailit with my feeble fantasie;  
Like til a leaf that fallis from a tree,  
Or til a reed ourblawin with the win.  
Twa gods guides me: the ane of tham is blin,  
Yea and a bairn brocht up in vanitie;  
The next a wife ingenrit of the sea,  
And lichtre nor a dauphin with her fin.  
Unhappy is the man for evermair  
That tills the sand and sawis in the air;**



**But twice unhappier is he, I lairn,  
That feidis in his hairt a mad desire,  
And follows on a woman throw the fire,  
Led by a blind and teachit by a bairn.**